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ON SYSTEMATIC READING,
AND THE ANDREA PONTI
HISTORICAL LIBRARY.



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ON SYSTEMATIC READING, AND THE ANDREA PONTI HISTORICAL LIBRARY.

ONE of the defects of modern culture is the tendency to accumulate a vast number of ideas on every subject, without being able to coordinate or assimilate them.

The invasion of mediocre literature, the distracting influence of the many reviews and magazines, must create in the mind of the reader a dangerous confusion.

It might be objected that this confusion is inevitable, that it indicates progress, since through the disorder a number of good things and of new ideas find their way into the modern mind. But we must not be blind to the dangers of the present state of things, and to the necessity of removing it. The half culture resulting from these conditions is worse than total ignorance. It warps the judgment of the reader, blinds him to what he does not know, deters him from further research about what he thinks he knows, and thereby prevents his pursuit of that solid education of soul and intellect which should continue throughout life.

It is not unusual to find among those regarded as people of limited culture, persons of high moral character in whom every effort of the mind is directed toward a settled purpose, whose thoughts are concentrated upon a single aim, impressing a permanent direction upon the whole character.

« One does not possess true mastery of oneself », wrote Madame Necker, « until after having made as it were, a « scheme of thought upon all important subjects, a system « of ideas, of opinions to be constantly followed. Such a « system is the fruit of our reflections, enriched each day « by what we have heard and read and found nearest to

« our fixed ideas, and unite to these, or so to speak, link « to them. The mind only retains things which form a « chain with those it has already acquired ».

The important thing is not the knowledge of many things, but to know well what one knows, to know well one's own limits and to discern clearly the road that must be followed in order to acquire so much of truth as may be accessible to each one of us.

This is what gives unity and strength to the moral character, which induces us to be sincere with ourselves, and to ask ourselves when we take up a book, the reason why we read it. If it be for the sake of amusement, nothing is more legitimate; if to awaken our enthusiasm, or to find quiet and serenity, we need demand nothing more of the book which calls forth the desired state of mind. But if we read a book for the purpose of acquiring knowledge, we must consider how to prepare the ground for its reception; otherwise the knowledge will soon be dispersed like morning mist.

The great popularity of books of fiction is the object of much severe comment, yet these satisfy a healthy craving in the public which, finding only fragmentary and dispersed literature to satisfy its demand for serious information, gives up the quest altogether. Knowledge on serious subjects cannot be acquired by miscellaneous and disorderly reading and requires a certain amount of preliminary knowledge to enable the student to coordinate the ideas received. A novel constitutes, on the other hand, a complete whole, a perfect thing, and the general public in its enjoyment of that kind of reading, shows a far better taste than those who, fed on confused ideas drawn from reviews and magazines, constitute themselves its censors.

But what guidance is offered to those desirous of increasing their culture by the reading of serious books? To

whom are they to turn? The libraries, ever more numerous and better administered, should open the way, but they limit their action to offering catalogues arranged in alphabetic or in systematic order, some of which would form splendid bibliographies on special subjects. This class of catalogue does certainly help the reader to find his way, but to how small an extent... Such catalogues are really useful only to those who already know something of the subject, while those who are quite ignorant of it, are either repelled altogether on finding themselves confronted by such a formidable array of books and authors, or grope in the dark, losing time, and often courage and interest.

On the other hand, as Wells observes in his volume *Mankind in the Making*, no nation can live now-a-days without being well aired by books: a good choice of reading is as vital to the intelligence of the modern public, as are open windows to the consumptive. While lamenting the waste of time required in order to find one's way through the enormous mass of printed matter, Wells proposes a complete plan of methodical reading to enable him who draws near to the precious patrimony now accessible to the modern reader, to really enter into possession thereof.

A noteworthy coincidence has occurred between the thought of Wells, and that of the founder of a circulating library, the Historical Library Andrea Ponti, founded in Ravenna in 1897, which, so far as we can learn, is the first one established on this plan, and presents a new type (1).

The Library is characterised as *Historical*, not because its content is limited to historical topics, but because the books, offered in groups on given subjects, are presented

(1) Countess Maria Pasolini, born Ponti, who originated the plan, has not considered it presumptuous to call the Library by the name of her father, who lived in Milan and was the promotor of every kind of economic and intellectual activity in his own country.

with a *Catalogue raisonné* following the logical — which is also the historical — development of the subject. Thus guided, the reader is led to follow that historical method which is the basis of real knowledge in all branches of culture.

This library, founded as a circulating library, is intended to fill a twofold purpose, offering not only special sets of books on particular subjects, but also works of general interest, so as to keep the reader in touch with modern culture as a whole. Accordingly it publishes two separate sets of catalogues, the first set called *Serie Fissa* (*Permanent Series*) and the other, *Fuori Serie* (*Extra Series*).

The *Permanent Series* Catalogues offer the reader the works considered as best and most reliable on any given subject, according to its logical order of development. They give a general idea of the subject, referring as they proceed to the books which may best explain and illustrate the particular facts and details connected with it. Each catalogue is in itself an essay upon the subject treated. It is like an architect's sketch or outline of a building, and should be complemented by the perusal of the books mentioned, or of others relating to the subject, which may attract the student's attention as he pursues his studies.

There exist, of course, many other systematic and excellent catalogues, but we know of no other which traces the fundamental lines of the subject in just this way.

The second set of catalogues is meant, as the title clearly explains (*extra series*), to introduce the reader to books on various subjects not included in the permanent series; the latest novelties deserving to be known, long forgotten books having a permanent interest, or touching on some question of the day, and finally, entertaining literature of all kinds. But even these books are presented

to the reader in the light of a central idea which gives them their full value. For instance, novels of a particular country, or a particular kind, are associated with some literary work which illustrates their significance.

This seemed the best method to enable the public to follow the intellectual movement of the day, and to complete the work contemplated by the first set of catalogues.

It was the intention of the Founder to supply this library with the various works and the corresponding illustrative catalogues (Extra Series) according to the funds available.

Such was the general object held in view, and it is to be hoped that it may some day be fully realised. But for various practical reasons the publication of these Extra Series Catalogues had to be suspended after the No. III, and only the *Permanent Series Catalogues* are published for the present.

Each of these may be said to contribute to the indispensable knowledge of the special science or topic to which it relates, and it is to these that we desire to call the particular notice of the public as examples of an idea which may be applied in different ways to any popular library.

Such as they are, they may be found useful for the promotion of general culture, the different numbers being sold on application.

Four Permanent Series Catalogues, carefully edited by the founder, have already been published. Some of these have been prepared by the founder herself, others by the best authorities on the subject. The catalogues comprise thus far, the following subjects:

- I. Universal History.
- II. Economic and Social Science.
- III. The Question of Women.
- IV. The Italian National Revival.

This choice of subjects is easily accounted for. History is the foundation of every kind of culture, but unfortunately a great many students reach the close of their career, without having acquired the sense of that marvellous chain made by the events which have formed the civilization in which they live. The object of the Universal History Catalogue, is to induce the student to read with pleasure, but always according to a settled and organic plan, a series of books representative of the various characteristic stages through which mankind has passed; books illustrating in chronological order the great epochs of human history, so that the perusal of each work should inspire the wish to read the next on the list, and the perusal of the whole series become a necessity, or an intellectual habit.

The books selected are almost all of them written in a pleasant and easy form, and if they do not always represent the height of learned research, if they do not all say the last word on their subject, they are enlivened by an artistic charm which leaves on the reader a vivid and lasting impression, carries his imagination into a particular period, and makes him familiar with the most notable events and personalities of each epoch. The current handbooks on Universal History, even the best, do not convey to the mind that great synthesis which throws so much light on history, and gives interest and life to particular events. This catalogue tries to fill this blank.

In our democratic societies, citizens are daily called upon to act as judges and to discuss public affairs, and are therefore supposed to possess a knowledge of social and economic facts; but it generally happens that they are quite unprepared to fulfil the duties devolving upon them. Only a thoughtful knowledge of social facts and of the laws that govern them, can give the different classes the fine discrimination, the sense of justice, and

the directness of action, which are necessary tho the life of society.

The scheme for the study of Economic and Social Questions presented in the Andrea Ponti Historical Library has had the cooperation and approval of distinguished authorities, and the catalogue has now been in the hands of university students for several years past.

The Woman question had also to be considered, especially in Italy, where it is of very recent date. No. III Permanent Series, is devoted to this study.

The first step to a larger sympathy with mankind is the love and knowledge of one's own country. Italy has had such an intricate history, the vicissitudes of her past life are so interwoven with her Revival as an United Kingdom, that without a full knowledge of her history it is impossible to understand the moral unity of the traditions which have led to that political unity as a nation, the story of which is studied today with passion and interest even abroad. Says one of our poets: « Never was a national unity achieved « through the aspiration of higher and purer minds, the sacrifice of nobler and holier spirits, or with greater and freer consent of all the best part of the people ». The catalogue relating to the History of our National Revival, drawn up by one of our most eminent historians, is among the best contributions to Italian History.

The publication of other catalogues is so dependent on practical considerations, and on the possibility of finding persons of special competence to undertake their preparation, that it is not easy for the Andrea Ponti Library to fix before hand on the order of its future publications. The Library hopes soon to offer a catalogue on Art, and one on Ethics. The purpose of the latter is to put into the

hands of teachers and parents, a clue to the best sources of information on educational problems, a sort of handbook to help them in their noble task; moreover, to place within reach of all those who desire to cultivate their inner life, an everflowing spring, from which to draw comfort and uplifting.

Is it possible to over estimate the importance of the systematic catalogue purposing to regulate the use of one of the greatest forces of the century, Books! Under this modest name hides a secret which may give order and unity to our modern mind, now so distracted and dispersed by the multiplicity of new things which have surprised and surrounded it, and educate it to choose the good things useful to it, setting aside the many useless things by which it is beset.

We should like to think of Libraries as a garden rich in trees, flowers and fruits. Let us train ourselves, and train the reading public to cultivate the small plots entrusted to us, choosing the good seed, that it may be adorned with flowers and enriched with the fruit, best fitted to give nourishment, strength and beauty.

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